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ABSTRACT

Presbyopia, a condition which affects the eye's ability to change focus or to produce a clear image, makes an appropriate analogy through which to consider educational access for special needs students. Presbyopia can be corrected with properly fitted glasses; new "glasses" should be "prescribed" for teachers so that distortions related to student ability can be eliminated and teachers can respond to all students equally. Ways of presenting instructional materials or conducting activities to provide equal education for all students include: (1) providing visual and tactile augmentation to directions and instructions; (2) using time and material resources efficiently; (3) making opportunities for meaningful peer interaction; (4) allowing students to be aware of high teacher expectancy; (5) creating a supportive classroom structure; (6) reacting positively to difficult children; (7) giving encouraging feedback; (8) maintaining physical proximity to learning disabled children when moving about the classroom; (9) offering adequate response time to slow students; and (10) listening carefully and creatively to student responses. (JD)

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PRESBYOPIA AND THE MAINSTREAM CONCEPT

by

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Ajo Unified School District #15
Inservice Workshop

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PRESBYOPIA AND THE MAINSTREAM CONCEPT

or

DO WE NEED NEW GLASSES?

Visual acuity is critical in most activities related to school. Those tumbling E's on eye charts might indicate nearsightedness or farsightedness. More critical to successful mainstreaming is the ability of educators to get a clear focus on all students. Using presbyopia might be stretching a definition to make a point; yet, classroom achievement is dependent upon the perception of teachers. How teachers "see" students is all important because perceptions influence the quality and quantity of interactions, and interactions make the difference in learning.

Presbyopia is an appropriate analogy as we consider educational access for special needsstudents for its diagnosis indicates a loss of elasticity in the eye which affects the ability of the eye to change focus or to produce a clear image. This condition is corrected by properly fitted glasses. I'm prescribing new glasses for teachers -- glasses that eliminate the distortion related to student ability. These fashion-right spectacles enable teachers to respond to all students equitably. This prescription expects every student to succeed!

That's not such a big order for teachers have the basis for providing their own "properly fitted glasses" because specific teacher behaviors make the difference. Equal opportunity in the classroom is under the control of the teacher.

These effective teaching styles incorporate sound educational principles which impact on affective ard cognitive learning. Operationalizing these principles we need to focus on those startegies that work for all students. For example, with or without any label, we know 85% of us are visual learners. Oral directions need to be printed somewhere: blackboard, ditto sheet taped to desk, an assignment sheet. Provide this as you develop the mental set for a business-like classroom operation. For those who need a tactile graphics or object reference, examples of how to get started, what the finished product is to resemble and options can be displayed. How willing are you to accept a creative response? Or, is there only one right way to do it?

These simple ideas reinforce the planning of the teacher. Efficient use of time and material resources evidence the management of a subtle learning objective. By their behavior, teachers model the behavior they desire in both interpersonal relations and organizational modes. Demonstrating positive student-teacher interactions provides the foundation for constructive student-student interactions (Johnson and Johnson, 1980).

Opportunities for meaningful peer interactions must be structured by the teacher. The expectation of success, skills for productive learning and the recognition of interdependence is part of the setting developed by the classroom teacher.

In today's multistrata classroom, there are the high achievers, average, low achievers and mildly handicapped with their learning and citizenship needs. To address these various demands requires the use of classroom goal structures in balance. In the majority of classrooms, the competitive goal format dominates. Research indicates that the competitive format puts the mainstream student at a disadvantage. The individualized goal structure tends to isolate students, failing to address the social needs of constructive interaction. Interestingly the cooperative classroom structure is the least used yet the most purposeful in developing interpersonal skills. It is particularly important for youth to be accepted by their peers; in fact, the sense of belonging is critical to academic progress.

We need to look at how the classroom organization supports students, not only in the goal structure but teaching style, and teacher expectations. Teacher expectations cannot be overemphasized for the self-fulfilling prophecy comes into play. When someone believes you are able, you work diligently to live up to that belief. The reverse is also true. Vibes that infer inability produce less than total effort (Kerman, 1979).

Teachers tend to respond with more support or motivation to those they perceive as high achievers. Those perceived as low achievers receive interactions reduced in frequency and limited encouragement. Teachers need to be aware of their tendency to discriminate and to consciously interact equitably with all students. This is a very difficult prescription. It is exeeedingly tough to be positive with the one notorious for acting out behavior. The learning disabled are a challenge. Researchers note the L.D. student receives more criticism and receives fewer quality interactions. It is very important

for the learning disabled (and others) to achieve academically and socially. If they repeatedly receive negative reinforcement, they will acquire their status within the class as the behavior problem or some other derogatory label.

Psychology tells us to reward the desired behavior. Use feedback, praise and encouragement to build the self-concept that "I am of worth." Without a beginning level of self-esteem, students find academics irrelevant. Teachers in multistrata classrooms report the use of praise and praise with a reason as the behavior most easily used. The praise is directed at the work, not behavior reinforcing on-task behavior. Second to encouragement in ease of use was the effective teaching strategy of courtesy. A positive response to a student or a direction tempered with the tone of respect also built on the student awareness of being accepted as a person. These demonstrable behaviors model acceptance, a critical characteristic for constructive interactions and attitude change (Munroe, 1980).

Another behavior, monitoring, was readily practiced by classroom teachers. Whether total class or in small group sessions, teachers moved within arms distance of students. Proxemics of this type build the awareness that its "safe to have teacher near." Some students have teacher proximity only for disciplinary reasons. This cycle needs to be broken. Teachers should be aware that while circulating among the class members: 1) stand still while giving directions, 2) stand or work from in front of an L.D. student, and 3) provide affirming or correcting feedback to enable progress to the next stage.

Teachers alert to the cues of student learning preferences will give answers to students needing an authority figure. These students need the teacher to act as a teacher and not to say "what do you think?"

Moving about the room and providing feedback leads to the equitable distribution of response opportunities. Students need to be actively involved in the learning, yet we subtly ignore those we perceive as less able. This is usually interpreted as asking questions since so much of "school" seems related to questions and answers. However, dribbling a basketball, singing three notes, finishing a sentence or doing a math problem are examples of response opportunities too.

But since much of our time is spent asking questions, our skills in that regard need a closer look. What types of questions are effective in today's classroom? What do we as teachers need to do to give all students a chance to achieve? For openers, don't assume that recall questions are necessarily simple or easy. Do assume that if your question was worth asking, it is worth an answer and help it get answered. Getting that answer may require accepting other than one "right" answer; providing thinking time and clues to clarify the question or type of answer (Rowe, 1974).

Higher level questions which require organizing information or applying facts seldom have only one answer. If teaching how to use knowledge is valuable, questioning skills should reflect that too.

Thinking time seems a given yet in actuality we give a student 1-1/2 seconds to respond to our questions. Increase that time to 5, 10 or 15 seconds and the proportion of answers will increase also. To validate the wait time, relax. Allow students to relax as you build the awareness that "my teacher thinks I'm able and will wait for me to answer." This nonverbal behavior carries more credibility with students than much of our verbal behavior. Following the period of waiting, provide cues or rephrase the question. This behavior called probing or delving takes into account our imperfect questioning techniques as well as the student's need for more direction or clarification.

We've emphasized setting the stage to insure getting the question answered; the question now is did you hear the answer? Students spend a great deal of time responding, yet are destroyed when their comments aren't heard. How well do we listen and how do students know we care about their opinion? Attentive listenting skills can be practiced and coupled with a caring attitude we can continue to build the student's self-esteem. Teaching and modeling listening skills enable students to hear one another, thus reducing the rejection that comes from being ignored. The social climate in the classroom is the responsibility of the teacher and classroom activities can be structured to enhance acceptance (Emrick, 1980).

Our glasses need to provide 20/20 vision when it comes to controlling misbehavior. Equitable desist patterns do not reveal an expectation of appropriate behavior from some and misbehavior from others. Educators need to

form a single image of acceptable behavior and be consistent in response and tone to all students. The reassurance of being treated fairly builds a trust relationship essential in the learning environment.

You're nodding and saying "All well and good, but I have 6 different. . ." We start with students where they are. Use diagnostic assessment tools to determine needs, regardless of perceived level. Utilize small groups to re-teach concepts; take advantage of peer tutoring and teaming; yes, work to meet those identified needs through constructive interactions -- interactions that are provided equitably to all learners.

The range of individual differences will likely expand with the responsibility for teaching remaining with the classroom teacher. To achieve this task, teachers not only need subject matter competence, strategies that work and management skills, but the ability to see students in a new clear manner. Corrective lenses for our perceptions can make a real difference in the student's achievement and the teacher's sense of efficacy.

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